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The Asymmetry of British Modernism: Hugh MacDiarmid and Wyndham Lewis

Alex Thomson

Devolution in the United Kingdom has begun to affect our understanding of modern literary history, if only because the tendency silently to conflate English with British has been made increasingly problematic. This is particularly marked in the case of Scotland. Critics and historians of Scottish literature have asserted the continuity of a different tradition north of the border. Scholars writing on English literature take pains not to make generalisations that seem to apply to the other country. But while this may represent appropriate caution in asking how contemporary British literature is constituted in the context of the process of political devolution, or in relation to the Romantic period, when Edinburgh could boast both a distinctive intellectual tradition and a thriving publishing industry, it may be more problematic in relation to the period we describe as 'modernist'. The increased presence of the national question in the study of modernist literature, and the development of transnational approaches to literary study, also foreground the tacit assumptions that may have guided earlier accounts of tradition.¹ But does our caution lead us to overstate cultural and artistic difference? In this essay I will reflect on this problem by examining the relationship between Scotland's pre-eminent modernist poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Wyndham Lewis, who plays a central, if contested, role in our understanding of modernism in Britain.

British historians have stressed the significance of the late 1920s and 1930s for the formation of our contemporary understanding of nation. The vocabulary of national character was ubiquitous, argues

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Peter Mandler, making its use in the period 'almost maddeningly flexible'.² So national identity may have been a topic of keen debate in Scotland, but the ubiquity of this discussion challenges Scottish exceptionalism.³ Both Wyndham Lewis and Chris Grieve, better known by his pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid, pit themselves against the time of progress they associate with the complacent cultural confidence of nineteenth-century Britain: 'BLAST / years 1837 to 1900' as the 'Manifesto' in the first issue of Lewis's Vorticist journal *Blast* puts it.⁴ Each outflanks the rhetoric of national decline through the adoption of larger accounts of European cultural and spiritual crisis, while calling for not just national renewal, but national renewal premised on a stronger sense of national belonging. This leads to an uneasy relationship with Continental fascism; but the positions of both have been obscured by their avant-garde political strategies, and by the adoption of an extremism both characterised as un-English.

If, as Hannah Arendt argues, the 1920s and 1930s mark the point at which 'the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation had been completed; the nation had conquered the state', then the nation must become a central problem for any study of the relationship between art and politics in the period.⁵ Yet the emergence of the national question is itself a problem of modernism. The beginning of a self-consciously modern literature can be dated to the vernacular fall of learning into national languages. This pre-dates and prepares the romantic understanding of the nation as the speculative solution to the diremption of ethical life from the realm of law and the reality of class conflict. So if our conception of the time of national life seems to be premised on the taming of history by the orderly pattern of continuity, sequence and succession, it is also unthinkable without the possibility of belatedness, and the opening of a gap between the nation and its proper time that may require not merely incremental improvement, but a revolutionary leap. Hence the nation is always at risk of seeming merely provincial, and the discussion of national character when pursued in any thoughtful manner always has the temporal and political form of a critique. This also sets up a powerful and programmatic machine for turning artworks into the evidence of national life: aesthetic criticism linked to questions of national tradition asks us to identify stylistic restlessness with cultural vitality, and this is easily parlayed into a proxy for political resistance. Reflection on the connections between Lewis and MacDiarmid sheds light not only on what I call the 'asymmetry' of British modernism but also on the tensions between the energies of avant-garde artworks

and their reappropriation by the national style which continues to underpin much writing of cultural history.

MacDiarmid and Lewis

Both Lewis and Grieve are known for their interest in confrontation and provocation. Both cultivated aggressive public personae, reflected both in their polemical encounters with other writers and in their radical political stances. The difficulty of absorbing both writers into our accounts of British modernism seems appropriate given the spiky, rebarbative, oppositional nature of their thinking. Certainly, it is this image of Lewis which appeals to the younger man. In a 1928 essay, Grieve's poetic alter-ego Hugh MacDiarmid notes that Lewis has 'a powerful imagination and an analytical mind of altogether exceptional acuity', that 'his destructive criticism is the best of its kind to be read in English today' and that his views on nationalism are of particular relevance to the Scottish situation.⁶ Grieve finds in Lewis a precedent for the formation of a specifically national artistic avant-garde and for the figure of the intellectual as scourge of complacent thinking.

Although Lewis is not the focus of the repeated attention that other figures such as Dostoevsky, Joyce, or Shestov receive, references to him and his work can be found throughout Grieve's career. His correspondence with George Ogilvie during the First World War testifies to Grieve's knowledge of Lewis's early stories and enthusiasm for them. Reference to a lost work titled "'The Scottish Vortex" (as per the system exemplified in *Blast*)' has been repeatedly used by commentators as the basis for comparison, and the early prose writings collected in the *Annals of the Five Senses* have been fruitfully compared with those that made up Lewis's *The Wild Body*.⁷ It is harder to assess which specific works of Lewis's cultural criticism of the later 1920s Grieve knew, and a reference in a 1927 essay to 'the tendency of the age, the "time-stream philosophy" against which Mr Wyndham Lewis is so ably contending in his magazine *The Enemy*', suggests that the latter is most valuable to Grieve not for the specific arguments of his work, but as a British example of a pan-European discourse of cultural crisis descending via Spengler from Russian writers.⁸ Much later works continue to refer to Lewis positively: he is invoked as a precedent in *Lucky Poet* (1943), MacDiarmid's *biographia literaria*; and he is cited approvingly in *Aesthetics in Scotland* (unpublished, but dated by its editor to 1950).⁹ The allusion to *Self Condemned* and direct borrowing from *The Wild Body* in *In Memoriam James Joyce*, the major poetic work

of his later period, suggests that Grieve is more interested in Lewis as a model of radical cultural criticism and advanced artistic production than for his critical views themselves.¹⁰

Although C. H. Sisson compared the poetry of the two men on the basis of the 'hardness' of their respective styles, the relationship between Lewis and Grieve seems to have run in one direction only. The basis for Sisson's comparison is MacDiarmid's 1930s turn away from the use of dialect in his poetry, and from broadly expressionist lyric verse to a style 'that represents the longest distance travelled, from the romanticism of the last century, for it is verse used once again as a common medium of expression, fit for any matter'.¹¹ The repeated setbacks to MacDiarmid's publication plans in the 1930s, his geographical isolation in the Shetlands, the breakdown of his health, and the onset of the Second World War, mean that the greater extent of this later work only emerges after Lewis's death in 1953. However, Lewis certainly knew of MacDiarmid, at least by reputation. In one of the poems from the 1933 volume *One-Way Song*, 'If so the man you are', his Enemy persona lists 'MacDiarmid beneath a rampant thistle' among his contemporaries.¹² Naomi Mitchison seems to have seen a parallel between them, and it is plausible that she would have brought MacDiarmid up in discussion with her friend. She appears to have done so in a 1947 letter. In his reply, Lewis indicates that his acquaintance with MacDiarmid is second hand ('they tell me [his] dialect verse is splendid stuff'), before complaining that 'it has made me feel quite tired thinking of all the "quarrelling" that I am supposed to have done and that Macdiarmid [sic] does'.¹³

The extent of Grieve's valuation of Lewis is clearest in a pair of essays written in the early 1930s. Not only does his opinion not change in the wake of Lewis's *Hitler* (1931), but he explicitly defends Lewis, taking him as a figure of intellectual integrity. Reviewing Gawsworth's *Apes, Japes and Hitlerism* in 1932, Grieve hails Lewis as 'a splendid protagonist of the free man; [...] one of the most stimulating, versatile, searching and incorruptible of our living figures'. Like Lewis, he claims, his political writing is suppressed by the newspapers, themselves controlled by financial interests. Like Lewis, he hails Hitler as a figure of the necessary militancy required to throw over 'Loan capital'. When Lewis writes of Hitler as '*resolved, with that admirable tenacity, hardihood, and intellectual acumen of the Teuton [...] to seize the big bull of Finance by the horns, and to take a chance for the sake of freedom*' (Grieve's italics), Grieve takes this as the model 'of what ought to be the spirit of the Scottish Movement'.¹⁴

This connection between Nazism and Scottish nationalism is not singular. In the programmatic 1931 essay 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', MacDiarmid calls for East-West synthesis on the basis of a Gaelic idea which 'stands outside Europe altogether', a principle which is still being reiterated in the 1950 text *Aesthetics in Scotland*, and which underlies both the poetic and critical work of the period. Here the interest is not so much the figure of the strong leader and the defence of the intellectual's right to think the unthinkable, but an account of politics defined in terms of racial or national consciousness. MacDiarmid quotes directly from Lewis's *Hitler* to call for a greater sense of '*Blutsgefühl*': 'a closer and closer drawing together of the people of one race and culture, by means of bodily attraction'.¹⁵ These remarks have proven challenging for MacDiarmid's admirers. His concern to overcome class conflict leads him directly to a naturalistic vocabulary of race that subsequent admirers of the general drift of his politics—socialist, republican, nationalist—have struggled to accommodate. In the most detailed study of his politics, Scott Lyall comments that "'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea" [...] finds the hymnist of Lenin on indefensible fascist terrain'.¹⁶ But if we are to see some of MacDiarmid's statements as errors of judgement, are we free to pick and choose? This is not to clear MacDiarmid of responsibility. His call for spiritual renewal echoes that of many other intellectuals of the interwar years; so does his figuring of that renewal in terms that swither between the geographical, the cultural, and the racial.

We have seen that it is the figure of Lewis that matters more to MacDiarmid than the content of his ideas, and our view of these essays can also be qualified by contextual understanding. For example, in the case of 'Hitler, Wyndham Lewis and Scotland' (his review of Gawsworth) we need to know that the two men knew each other from Grieve's time in London when he worked as a director of Unicorn Press, publisher of the book under review. Grieve is writing in *The Free Man*, a Douglasite journal for which the credit issue is the pre-eminent topic of debate; praise of Hitler's 'manhood' echoes the journal's masthead call for a 'virile nationalism'. So Lewis is of interest to readers of *The Free Man*, perhaps more than Hitler is, because he sees leadership in terms of virile manhood. Grieve maintained much of his journalism at a furious pace as it was his main means of subsistence, and his essay shows signs of haste: Gawsworth is spelt 'Gasworth' throughout. In the case of 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', MacDiarmid's collage-style working methods are ambiguous as to his specific acquaintance with the book or the idea in question.

In fact, the only direct citation of Lewis's book in it seems to have been taken from a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, as another comment praising Lewis also comes from that review.¹⁷ If MacDiarmid had not read Lewis's *Hitler* at this point, he would do so later, since as Hamish Henderson notes, another passage from it is absorbed into his poem of the same period, 'The Chthonian Image'.¹⁸ MacDiarmid gives the impression of his cultural authority by dramatising a debate he has found in one periodical, and excerpting or paraphrasing it in another.

But even if the 1932 review may be set aside as hackwork, it is harder to do the same with the 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', where Lewis's account of *Blutsgefühl* in *Hitler* is joined to MacDiarmid's own account of the Gaelic idea. Lewis's discussion of the idea in his book is consistent with his invocation of racial or cultural identity to counteract the divisive idea of class. Although dependent on racial difference, his focus is not so much on racial hierarchy as an exaggerated image of social community – the levelling of social difference and a state built on tight, affective bonds between individuals. Leaving aside the detail of this Nazi ideology, Lewis turns to berating the Englishman for the 'entire absence in himself of any feeling that could be described as "racial"'.¹⁹ He upholds the principle of racial identification as a political virtue, associating it with Classicism, defined as an interest in that which is close to hand, rather than for the exotic or strange. However, Lewis goes on to oppose this race feeling to nationalism, seeing the 'rather unreal modern conception of "the nation"' as a divisive trick played on what should be a Northern European community.²⁰ The aim is as much to provide a point of rhetorical contrast with the author's own national context as to understand fascist ideology for its own sake.

Just as Lewis uses Nazi racial ideologies more as a negative image of English failings, so too MacDiarmid's appeal to racial vocabulary is overdetermined by the complex and overlapping usage of political, racial, and religious discourse in the Scotland of the 1920s and 1930s. Ethnocentric myths of national decline were common, often tied to fears of an influx of Irish immigrants, in part promoted by the Scottish churches.²¹ This radical Protestantism stressed an Anglo-Saxon and Protestant Scotland – two factors that had played a long-term role in the discourse of Unionism. MacDiarmid's nationalism instead has recourse to an account of Gaelic or Celtic Scotland, which in turn implies the commonality between Lowland Scots and the immigrants from Ireland. Fascist parties in Scotland were not naturally allied to the anti-Irish sentiment of the period, as fascism was commonly associated

with Mussolini and the Catholic South. It has been suggested that the consequent conflict with the Protestant movement undercut the possible support of the British Union of Fascists and weakened Scottish fascism in general as rival sectarian fascist parties also challenged the BUF's anti-sectarian line. Moreover, despite some overlap between fascist and nationalist sympathisers, the official BUF line was always Unionist, and the nationalist parties provided an alternative route for activism.²²

Read in this light, MacDiarmid's appeal to Hitler runs against the dominant fascist line, as he also stresses 'the importance of the fact that we are a Gaelic people, that Scottish anti-Irishness is a profound mistake, that we ought to be anti-English, and that we ought to play our part in a three-to-one policy of Scotland, Ireland and Wales against England to reduce that "prominent partner" to its proper subordinate role in our internal and imperial affairs'.²³ MacDiarmid's central focus on the demarcation of Scotland from England, part of his wider interest in the value of decentralisation in the British Isles, runs against the mainstream of British and Scottish fascism, which is interested in hierarchy, centralisation, and Unionism. Even when couched in racial terms, his arguments run against Unionism and therefore against the actual fascist parties of his day.

Here the ambiguities of Lewis's politics are helpful. Alan Munton warns that 'the politics of Wyndham Lewis are perhaps the most difficult to grasp of any among the modernist writers'. Similar problems accompany the interpretation of MacDiarmid.²⁴ Munton has argued persuasively that the overall drift of Lewis's thought is so strongly influenced by anarchist ideas that, although hostile to democracy, the radical impulse in his work is directed not towards hierarchy and order, but towards freeing men from the confusion of politics—even when calling for centralisation, as in praising *Blutsgefühl* as a principle of 'concentration' rather than diffusion or mixture.²⁵ In MacDiarmid we see the apparent paradox of an interest in strong leaders and the cult of the intellectual as outsider, combined with a humanitarian and egalitarian sentiment; albeit masked by the virulent critique of the herd for its conformism, considered an abdication of its true potential. For both, it is fair to describe their political arguments as primarily reactionary—springing from their opposition to the Imperial, Unionist Britain of the Victorian years and its legacy in both England and Scotland. They share a belief that the decay of the age goes deeper than mere national decline, and each deploys a political rhetoric whose horizon is national, but whose ambition is more profound.

Nation and avant-garde

Understanding the nature of the terrain shared between MacDiarmid and Lewis requires a sense of the asymmetry of British modernism. Some comments from Lewis's *Hitler* book are helpful here. In the book's opening Lewis suggests one of the motivations of the project, observing that 'extremism of any sort is highly antipathetic to the Anglo-Saxon'.²⁶ MacDiarmid would have had little disagreement, his preference for extremes being one of the few constants in his career. In 1923, his 'Programme for a Scottish Fascism' argued that what Scotland most needed was extremism, a view attributable to his sense that extremism could both radicalise Scotland and distinguish it from Anglo-Saxonism. In 1964, he joined Isaiah Berlin in debate at the Oxford Union on the topic 'Extremism in defence of liberty is no vice – moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue'.²⁷ Although it is just as possible to define Englishness in terms of the spirit of dissenting Protestant non-conformism, Lewis's comments suggest a prominent characterisation of the English disposition in the period as one of moderate and complacent liberalism.

The asymmetrical nature of British modernism stems from the dominance of this account of English national character. Josephine Guy suggests that any theory of the avant-garde has to factor in the differential expression of the same impulse in relation to specific national contexts.²⁸ Extending this point, I suggest that the artistic reaction against British materialism in the service of national renewal must take on different forms when, as for Lewis, this means the oppositional attempt to overthrow English character from within rather than, as for MacDiarmid, designating the effort to distinguish Scottish national character from English. Consideration of the dialectic of national character in the first issue of *Blast*'s 'Manifesto' offers an insight into the avant-gardist quality of MacDiarmid's cultural-political strategies. A common strategy of future-oriented radicalism can be carried out in the name of, and in opposition to, the nation. But in the Scottish case, there is a danger of the polemical force of the contrast relapsing in the affirmation of already-achieved national character. So the comparison with the Vorticist approach in turn gives some insight into the tensions within MacDiarmid's work, and the difficulty of giving a satisfactory historical account of the Scottish Renaissance movement, if we take seriously the avant-gardist quality of its cultural strategies.

Blast is an unusual example of the attempt to found a native, even nativist, avant-gardism in England, and has been prominent in recent scholarship reflecting a surge of interest in the national question in

the period. The Edwardian period had seen a revival of discussion about the nature of the English character, defined more strongly than at any point in the nineteenth century in opposition to the idea of a British character or identity.²⁹ The idea of imperial or national decline led to a revival of critical discourses of nation, combining critique and appeal to national renewal. This revival and the easy availability of the vocabulary of national character to support widely contrasting political positions are mimed and mocked in the first issue of *Blast*, most clearly in the 'Manifesto', whose form itself imitates that of earlier avant-garde manifestos, and which stages a dialectic between the characters of English and French culture. The journal acknowledges and mocks its own cultural belatedness. As a reaction to Futurism it must testify to the second-hand formation of an English avant-garde, but also, paradoxically, to the greater urgency for such a formation, given the further cultural provinciality of London. France here stands in for an idea of cultural modernity, and this leads Paul Peppis to argue that, reflecting a widespread perception in the period that English culture had in some sense fallen behind, *Blast* exemplifies 'an explicitly nationalistic cultural doctrine', 'roughly consistent with popular patriotism and government policy'.³⁰

This conclusion may be problematic. As Stefan Collini has observed, the comparison with France must be seen as belonging to the deep structures of national self-perception since the late eighteenth century, in which England is measured against French political, cultural, and intellectual modernity.³¹ Moreover, in the case of the *Blast* manifesto, whatever the personal views of its signatories, how seriously can we take its sentiments? Peppis gives credence to its invocation of the English as a nation of sea-farers. But this is a cliché whose lack of reference to history was already being challenged by Victorian historian J. Seeley in 1883: 'It seems to us clear that we are the great wandering, working, colonising race, descended from sea-rovers and Vikings [...]. And yet in fact it was only in the Elizabethan age that England began to discover her vocation to trade and to the dominion of the sea'.³² One feature of satire is its tendency to descend into irony; for this reason a cultural historian will find it difficult to stabilise its meaning. Within *Blast*, this owes partly to its dialectical formulation, partly to its use of collage as a structuring principle in which the arrangement matters more than any of the specific statements of which it is made, and partly to its satirical repetition of those cultural views. More importantly, art is not life, and we can never be certain when the historical expression of an opinion is the critical analysis of, and distancing from, that opinion. Beneath what Perloff characterises as

the 'situational aesthetic' of the modernist manifesto as form, lies what Denis Hollier has called the more fundamental 'equivocation' between literature and politics.³³ So if *Blast* bears witness to the inescapability of the horizon of the national culture for avant-garde discourse, the ambiguity of the direction of critique in the journal suggests an attempt not so much to resolve this dilemma (recognised as constitutive) but to amplify its force, to become critical in the sense of provoking a crisis.

This reaction is distinctive of the avant-garde turn within modernism. Protesting and ridiculing—but also exaggerating and extending the modern conception of time as the continual invention of the new, and of historical time as being structured by the experience of temporality as continual change—the underlying logic of the avant-garde is that of seeing the present as the site of an eschatological eruption, a radical novelty directed against the merely new. The idea of a radical novelty offers a complex basis from which to judge and criticise progress, both as a rhetorical or ideological justification of the present as improvement on the past, and as the deep logic undergirding the bourgeois society of the late nineteenth century. The complexity of this basis is that it is both a ground and an absence of ground—a projection of something impossible or unattainable. The negative dialectic of *Blast*, a critique of the provincial from the metropolitan and of the metropolitan from the provincial, suspends both approaches.

MacDiarmid's poetry reflects the ambiguity of this avant-garde legacy in his work. His celebrated early lyrics are powerful experiments in an imagist style, heightened by his use of striking and singular lexical items drawn from the Scots dictionary. Juxtaposed images dramatise clashing perspectives. In 'Empty Vessel' from *Penny Wheep* (1926), the mournful singing of the bereaved mother in the first stanza is thrown against the backdrop of the universe in the second through the metaphorical comparison with the harmony of the spheres. If the 'licht that bends owre a' thing / Is less ta'en up wi't' that is because both the cosmic radiation and the scientific account of the universe are equally indifferent to the drama that absorbs any individual human life.³⁴ The poem, embracing both the impersonal majesty of the cosmos and the poignancy of the mother's loss, cannot finally align itself with either.

In MacDiarmid's longer work, the attempt to give a formal coherence to what might otherwise remain merely fragmentary collections of expressionist lyrics tends to collapse such productive tensions. *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), in particular, is marred

by the repetitive and static invocation of the image of the serpent underlying the fabric of reality. The outcome is the empty affirmation of an unknowable force beyond the limits of human understanding: 'Unconscious goal of history, [...] the mass o' men pursue / their puir blind purposes unaware o'you' (CP, 1: 287). *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) had similarly suggested that neither idealist nor materialist explanations of existence will ever be satisfactory since 'Man's spreit is wi' his ingangs twined, / In ways that he can ne'er unwind' (CP, 1: 101). But its dynamic use of paired and mutable symbols is more successful than the later poem insofar as the limitations of human comprehension are not overcome through the ascription of privileged insight to poetry but are critically traced and retraced. The cultural implications of the argument of *A Drunk Man* are that national or social renewal is dependent on a spiritual renewal of cosmic vision whose success cannot be presumed in advance:

He canna Scotland see wha yet
Canna see the Infinite
And Scotland in true scale to it. (CP, 1: 162)

In contrast, *To Circumjack Cencrastus* runs up against the problem that from a cosmological point of view any national history becomes radically contingent, a passing moment in a larger struggle. Rather than a struggle over the possibility of vision, the poem offers the reader the alternative between fatalism, seeing Scotland as 'a decadent State / That's dune its work, gien its Idea to the world' (CP, 1: 288), and faith in the possibility that 'At the richt time the richt men appear' (CP, 1: 287).

MacDiarmid's cultural criticism is generally less complex than his poetry, although it is often comparable in its form: collaged together from scraps of other material; often recycling his own writing; and with a tendency to obscure the nature and extent of his borrowing from others. The same political problems recur in more acute form. For example, faith in the coming of the 'richt men' reduces to a cult of strong leaders, evident not only in the Hymns to Lenin published through the 1930s, but in the articles already cited. Equally, the diagnosis of spiritual failure, intended to heighten political and cultural dissatisfaction, leads to a catastrophic version of Scottish history. Handled without due caution, the rhetoric of de-Anglicisation suggests a repudiation of the entire Scottish eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a period of racial decline.

This account is catastrophic in the full range of the word: it views history in light of its overturning. As a trope, catastrophe signals the

moment before the end, the last turn in a plot; in the discourse of Victorian natural science, it is an unprecedented and unforeseeable evolutionary or geological upheaval. MacDiarmid's history-writing is always in service of such a revolution. Rejecting the idea that 'history must be accepted whole', he describes his method as 'selecting certain elements from it as the basis of a possible new Scotland': 'I look [...] for the emergence of a new spirit in our national life with such a retroactive power as to restore the best elements of the Gaelic Commonwealth and to eliminate all the night-growth which has sprung up since the eclipse of the Gaelic sun'.³⁵ This visionary mode owes more to Carlyle than it does to Enlightenment historians. So although MacDiarmid continues to argue for the possibilities offered by new economic or social theories, his sense of their effectiveness remains dependent on a revolutionary or eschatological logic. His assault on Scotland's contemporary culture and its history is justified only by the urgency of his sense of historical crisis and by the strength of the spiritual forces ranged against the Scottish people. Only the coming transformation will retroactively legitimise its violence.

Because the idea of Renaissance expresses first and foremost the need for national rebirth, and only secondarily the claim to express that rebirth, this catastrophic account presents a significant challenge to contemporary criticism. Recent cultural historians have treated the Renaissance both as adequate diagnosis of cultural malaise and as evidence of its resolution. According to one such authority, the name itself is 'less an excessive hyperbole than a literal description of the rebirth of a nation's cultural vitality'.³⁶ This, however, suggests a rather complacent inheritance of the tradition, confusing the call for a national spiritual renewal with the evidence of cultural revival. History written in this mode treats an increase in the proportion of artistic forms marked by consideration of national peculiarity or partiality within the total cultural production of a society as evidence of improved or increased cultural production as such. But national colouring does not equal national revival. This is precisely the objection MacDiarmid makes to the Celtic revival, as we shall see, and it is this distinction which is now being minimised in recent criticism. An alternative approach has been to understand the Scottish Renaissance as a distinctive Scottish variant of international modernist styles. This has the value of stressing the impact of non-native ideas and styles. It attends to the belatedness of Scottish modernism, and it acknowledges tensions within the movement associated with clothing the alien impulse in native fabric.³⁷ However, this approach claims to absolve Scotland of belatedness by showing it to have reached cultural

modernity, yet continues to measure Scotland against international comparison points. It also downplays the tensions within the idea of Renaissance, and in particular the excessive nature of the claim to total spiritual revolution. My emphasis on MacDiarmid's inheritance of the avant-garde logic of *Blast* is intended to problematise the attempt to retrieve his legacy for either project.

Asymmetry and the Arnoldian Legacy

To set Lewis alongside MacDiarmid is to glimpse the production of distinctively national English and Scottish avant-garde discourses, but also to sense a common impulse to destroy and rebuild in the context of an Anglocentric literary tradition that had been tied throughout the nineteenth century to the blurring of cultural difference in the promotion of a single British tradition (albeit a tradition identified primarily in religious or political rather than cultural terms). When Eliot described Scottish writing as tributary to the greater stream of English literature in 1919, he was to a large extent defending that line, and foreshadowing his later emphasis on the value of the tension between different regional cultures for the vitality of the national whole in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948).³⁸ Eliot's patronage of MacDiarmid and publication of 'The English Ascendancy in British Literature' in *The Criterion* suggest at least a partial sympathy to his view on cultural differentiation, if not on political separatism. So, from one point of view, Eliot and MacDiarmid are aligned on the strength of cultural diversity in unity; the dispute would be whether that is possible without the alignment of culture with political autonomy. Lewis, however, probably disagreed. He writes in a postscript to a letter to Eliot, noted by Victor Barac: 'You are wrong, to my mind, about England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland'.³⁹ What distinguishes Lewis from both Eliot and MacDiarmid is his suspicion of the idea of Celticism. In this final section I will consider the difference this makes to their cultural politics.

Both Eliot and MacDiarmid inherit from Matthew Arnold an understanding of the cultural make-up of the British Isles couched in terms of an opposition between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon. In his lectures on Celtic literature, Arnold had sought to persuade his audience not just of the value of the peripheral cultures of their islands, but of the values embodied in those cultures as an alternative to those of the prosaic and pragmatic Anglo-Saxon. His understanding of Celtic peoples as living in closer proximity to their own history, and as expressing a vivid and distinctively aesthetic way of life, portrays

them as a necessary counterweight to the inevitable progress of modernisation, relaying categories from romantic philosophy into the mainstream of British cultural debate under cover of racial science. Arnold is sanguine about the possibility of escaping modernisation, which he sees as an inevitable process of fusion and centralisation. However, by appealing to common assumptions of his time about the hybrid racial composition of the English, he can stress that the values that are still to be seen in the disappearing Celtic provinces might be recovered within the commercial and industrial British heartlands.

The significance and ambiguity of this intervention (not least for those peripheral cultures that found themselves and their own sense of cultural identity conscripted in a larger account) is well documented. David Lloyd writes: 'Arnold's work had, not entirely paradoxically, a lasting influence on the self-definition of Celtic minorities even when they were seeking to achieve nationalist cultural identity'.⁴⁰ Daniel Williams has traced this influence more directly, using its differential reception to map different configurations of regional or local issues across the 1890s.⁴¹ The impact on MacDiarmid of this late romantic inheritance is widely attested, not least through the example of Yeats and the Irish Revival. Robert Crawford compares him to Pound in this regard: 'both [...] grew up with the Celtic Twilight in provincial towns; the inheritance of these men was Romantic, and it never really left them'.⁴² Other, more indirect paths can be traced: Arnold follows Renan, whose own equation of Celticism with the idea of style itself opens the way to a vitalist political aesthetics, influential in circles around Bergson, which included the Scottish painter John Duncan Fergusson, later to illustrate MacDiarmid's *In Memoriam James Joyce*.

MacDiarmid's relationship to the Celtic revivals of the 1890s is complex. As Laura O'Connor has stressed, MacDiarmid's rejection of the Celticism of the period is comparable to his rejection of any form of Home Rule as insufficiently decisive.⁴³ Yet, subsequent more radical precedents had given the idea of Celtic Scotland sharper teeth against the dominant late nineteenth-century combination of Protestantism and Unionism—what Harvie calls 'a Scottish variant of full-blown Anglo-Saxonism'—which still saw developmental and cultural differences in terms of racial hierarchy, and rejected in particular the Highlands, seen as both Gaelic and Catholic.⁴⁴ Crucially, the ethnic categories signal not only differentiation from the Anglo-Saxon south, but point to political and cultural tensions within Scotland. So in the wake of the Celtic revival, John Maclean had seen communist or socialist ideas as the expression of a Celtic

communitarianism.⁴⁵ MacDiarmid in his turn seeks to articulate, albeit schematically, the radical memory of this image of community (grounded in resistance to modernisation *qua* clearance, social atomisation, and urbanisation) with a political rather than a quietist or religious motif.

The operation of the Gaelic idea in MacDiarmid's essay broadly follows the avant-gardist strategies of his political approach in general. On the one hand, it primarily operates as a force of division in calling for a separation of cultural blocs associated in the ethological rhetoric accompanying the liberal constitutional tradition, which had emphasised the mixed racial composition of English culture in the context of progressive unification. On the other, it also appeals to Scottish unity, and affirms the image of the Gael as offering a political or spiritual alternative to the dominant culture of the industrial belt. That this is primarily spiritual rather than racial is made clear in the essay. Dealing with the possible objection that the Gaelic language is in decline, MacDiarmid argues that 'from the point of view of the Gaelic idea, knowledge of, or indeed even the existence of, Gaelic is immaterial'. What is important is not so much any ethology or racial distinction, nor even what we might now call ethnicity – meaning diversity of social practice and custom – but rather the idea not so much of the Gaelic but of the ideal itself: 'our movement will only be worth-while in precise proportion as any of its achievements are the by-products of a striving towards what can never be produced – the unattainable, the unrealizable, the impossible'.⁴⁶

MacDiarmid's de-Anglicisation programme must be read both in terms of political division, and as the demand for the Scottish people to purge themselves of the shackles of empiricism and anti-intellectualism. It is not the assertion of ethnic difference, so much as the exploitation of that rhetoric to open a space for total spiritual revolution; it is a radicalisation more than an inversion of Arnold's programme.

Lewis's relationship to the Arnoldian paradigm is equally complex. As we saw in *Hitler*, despite his political interest in the value of racial (meaning national) consciousness as a unifying force, Lewis suggests we need to think beyond the merely national to a larger consciousness of Northern European belonging. Moreover, interested primarily in the affective side of politics – nationalism as fellow feeling – he is sceptical about the genetic account of racial inheritance, considering it a form of romantic primitivism. In the British context, this amounts to a resistance to the currency of Celticism. This is clear from *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938), a pastiche

of the decade's proliferating literature on national character, and his study of Shakespeare, *The Lion and the Fox* (1927). In the appendix to *The Lion and the Fox*, Lewis argues that the Celt is a myth: 'to-day we know, and should have known all along, had we used our eyes, that the "Celt" does not exist, nor ever has'.⁴⁷ Renan, Morley, and Arnold had all drawn on the racial discourse of the later nineteenth century to describe Shakespeare as an example of the highest English genius in terms of the combination of Anglo-Saxon with Celtic traits. Lewis by contrast insists on the mixture of race at all creative periods and argues that Shakespeare's genius is not the expression, but the transcendence, of 'race, class and fashion' (*LF*, 296). He sees the idea of the Celtic itself as an enormous comic plot: 'two island neighbours, the Irishman and the Englishman, the Celt and the Teuton (both in the baleful grip of "celtism," which stands between them and success in science, or any exact, unemotional study), involved in a curious fratricidal strife and tangle of romantic misunderstandings' (*LF*, 319). Drawing on more recent scientific ethnology, Lewis argues against Arnold that the Celt and the Saxon in fact have much more in common than is generally accepted.

In *The Mysterious Mr Bull*, Lewis repeats his attack on the 'myth' of Celticism, and satirises race-based accounts of national history in general. In both books, he depicts the history of Britain in terms of successive waves of invasion, suggesting with tongue in cheek that the traits ascribed by Arnold to the Celt not only stem from an earlier source but also result in the fatal weakness of each tribe that in turn absorbs them. Notably, Lewis explicitly endows the narrative persona of the book with Celtic origins, establishing him as an outsider to the culture he is describing, while continuing to reject the terms of racial distinction. His Celticism is that of 'artistic sensibility' and 'philosophic intelligence' rather than race.⁴⁸ It is Arnold's mythic Celticism as high-mindedness. Consequently, the characteristics attributed to the English in *The Mysterious Mr Bull* echo those for which Arnold had condemned them: they are dull, stupid, ignorant, and complacent. England is a philistine 'democracy of the middle class' (*MMB*, 162) which is 'dominated by a really pathological dread of anything belonging to the intellect' (*MMB*, 170). Arnold plays an ambivalent role in *The Lion and the Fox*, as the propagator of the 'illusion of a difference', but also as someone who ironically exposes that myth. The late nineteenth-century spread of Celticism is for Lewis nothing but a sibling rivalry inflected with snobbery. In *The Mysterious Mr Bull*, Arnold again turns out to be both Lewis's opponent and his precedent. The Celt, as the figure of an artistic alternative to the humdrum rule of

Anglo-Saxon values, and hence offering the basis for taking a critical distance from the English, is a necessary fiction for Lewis as much as for MacDiarmid.

Lewis's scepticism about the Celtic myth allows for a conclusion. Appearing to characterise his own technique, he argues in the book that satire is, at best, 'an extremely violent form of criticism' which has no audience among the English, because 'they do not want to be disturbed [...] in their melancholy *tête-à-tête* with what remains to them of their past' (*MMB*, 154). That past is not the deep historical time of race memory, but the Victorian age. As in *Blast*, twenty years before, Lewis still aims to wake England from the torpor of 'life lived under a glass bell [...] the sudden and staggering opulence of Industrial England, its unassailable military position as an island-power, and Protestant Christianity, Germanic *Gemütlichkeit*, and Liberal politics' (*MMB*, 160–1). Unwilling to face the revolutionary characteristic of the modern age, the English are also incapable of the race consciousness which might lead them to take responsibility for their Empire and prevent them from dissipating their energies in diffusion. They are, he writes, 'the least *nationalist* of any of the races of Europe' (*MMB*, 218), apparently confirming Robert Young's analysis of the peculiarity of Englishness in the period. Because 'it was no single ethnicity but an amalgamation of many', Young argues, 'it became a cosmopolitan ethnicity that comprised the transcendence of individual ethnicity or nation'.⁴⁹ The critical rhetorical force of MacDiarmid's Gaelic idea stems from its renewal of the nineteenth-century opposition between Celtic and Saxon streams within British culture, recast as the idea of spirit itself. But it depends on an opposition whose referent is a myth of racial division. Lewis wants to overcome myth with intellect, but to give his satire purchase on the historical self-perception of the English, he is still required to situate himself within the terms of their tribal myths.

Notes

1. Since at least Pericles Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On what they call 'the transnational turn', see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 737–48.
2. Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 163.
3. On the former, see Richard Finlay, 'National Identity in Crisis: Politicians, Intellectuals and the "End of Scotland", 1920–1939', *History* 79 (1994): 242–59.
4. 'Manifesto I', *Blast* 1 (June 1914, rpt. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), 11–28, p. 18.

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5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), p. 275.
6. Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The National Idea and the Company it Keeps', *The Pictish Review*, in *The Raucle Tongue: Uncollected Prose*, ed. Angus Calder et al. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), vol. 2: 45–8.
7. See Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid* (London: Paladin, 1990), pp. 107, 118; Scott Lyall, *MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 34–5.
8. C. M. Grieve, 'Wider Aspects of Scottish Nationalism', *The Scots Independent* (November 1927) in *Raucle Tongue*, 2: 60–3, p. 62.
9. Hugh MacDiarmid, *Aesthetics in Scotland*, ed. Alan Bold (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1984).
10. Identified in Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 372 n. 23. See Alan Riach, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. 143–4.
11. C. H. Sisson, *English Poetry 1900–1950: An Assessment* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), p. 240.
12. Wyndham Lewis, *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979).
13. Wyndham Lewis, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 408.
14. C. M. Grieve, 'Scotland, Hitler and Wyndham Lewis', *The Free Man*, review of John Gawsworth, *Apes, Japes and Hitlerism* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932), in *Raucle Tongue*, 2: 405–7, p. 407.
15. Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', in *The Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 56–74.
16. Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*, p. 131.
17. 'Hitler and his Movement', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 (16 April 1931), p. 296.
18. Hamish Henderson, 'Zeus as Curly Snake: the Chthonian Image', in *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature*, ed. Alec Finlay (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004) 427–35. I am grateful to Corey Gibson for this reference.
19. Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 110.
20. *Ibid.* p. 140.
21. Richard Finlay, *Modern Scotland, 1914–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), pp. 94–101.
22. This discussion draws on Stephen Cullen, 'The Fasces and the Saltire: The Failure of the British Union of Fascists in Scotland, 1932–1940', *Scottish Historical Review* 87.2 (2008): 306–31; Henry Maitles, 'Blackshirts Across the Border: The British Union of Fascists in Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review* 82. 1 (2003): 92–100; Tony Milligan, 'The British Union of Fascists' Policy in Relation to Scotland', *Scottish Economic and Social History* 19 (1999): 1–17.
23. MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy', p. 71.
24. Alan Munton, 'Modernist Politics: Socialism, Anarchism, Fascism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, eds. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gasiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
25. Alan Munton, 'Wyndham Lewis: From Proudhon to Hitler (and back): the Strange Political Journey of Wyndham Lewis', *E-rea* 4.2 (2006): 27–33.

26. Lewis, *Hitler*, p. 4.
27. C. M. Grieve, 'Programme for a Scottish Fascism', *Scottish Nation* (June 1923) in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918–1939*, ed. Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: ASLS, 2004), pp. 317–19.
28. Josephine Guy, *The British Avant-Garde: The Theory and Politics of Tradition* (Brighton: Harvester, 1991).
29. Mandler, *The English National Character*, p. 139.
30. Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics and the English Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 10.
31. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); see also David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993).
32. Mandler, *The English National Character*, p. 114.
33. Marjorie Perloff, "'Violence and Precision": The Manifesto as Art Form', *Chicago Review* 34.2 (1984): 65–101; Denis Hollier, 'On Equivocation (Between Literature and Politics)', trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 55 (1990): 3–22.
34. Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, eds. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), vol. 1, p. 101. Subsequently cited parenthetically as *CP*, followed by volume and page number.
35. C. M. Grieve, 'The Conventional Scot and the Creative Spirit', *Pictish Review* (June 1928), in *Raule Tongue* 2: 52–6, p. 54. Compare this with the more measured C. M. Grieve, 'Is the Scottish Renaissance a Reality', *The Scots Observer* (4 Feb 1933), in *Raule Tongue* 2: 201–4.
36. Ian Brown and Alan Riach, 'Introduction', *Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Scottish Literature*, eds. Ian Brown and Alan Riach (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 1–14, p. 7.
37. See Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts: 1918–1959* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).
38. T. S. Eliot, 'Was there a Scottish Literature?', *Athenaeum* (1919), in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918–1939*, ed. Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: ASLS, 2004), pp. 7–10.
39. Victor Barac, 'The Culture Theories of Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot', in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, eds. Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 185–200, p. 192.
40. David Lloyd, 'Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics', *Cultural Critique* 2 (1985): 137–69, p. 142.
41. Daniel Williams, 'Pan-Celticism and the Limits of Post-Colonialism: W. B. Yeats, Ernest Rhys and William Sharp in the 1890s', in *Nations and Relations: Writing Across the British Isles*, eds. Tony Brown and Russell Stephens (Cardiff: New Welsh Review, 2000), pp. 1–29.
42. Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 245.
43. Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: the Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and de-Anglicization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
44. Christopher Harvie, 'Anglo-Saxons into Celts: the Scottish Intellectuals 1760–1930', in *Celticism*, ed. Terrence Brown (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 231–56, p. 241.
45. *Ibid.* pp. 253–4.
46. MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy', pp. 68–9.

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47. Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox* (London: G. Richards Ltd., 1927), p. 301. Subsequently cited parenthetically as *LF*, followed by page number.
48. Wyndham Lewis, *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1938), p. 17. Subsequently cited parenthetically as *MMB*.
49. Robert J. C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 232–3.